

Critical Reception

Max Frankel; Commercial Entrepreneurship; 2022

R.H. Burnside wrote and directed many productions for The Hippodrome in the early 1900's including *Good Times*, one of his most popular and acclaimed works. The work was produced by Charles Dillingham –then owner of the Hippodrome, and debuted on August 9, 1920. *Good Times* was a revue that featured stunts, elephant tricks, clown acts, musical numbers, and a large variety of other acts that took full advantage of the size and resources of the Hippodrome to throw as lavish a show as possible.

Burnside worked primarily in the early 20th century, at the height of the golden age of the revue. Other important figures from this era include Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, George Gershwin, and Cole Porter, all of whom began their Broadway careers writing on revues, George Cohan was writing and performing in vaudevilles, and of course, no revue can escape comparison to *Ziegfeld's Follies*.

Good Times debuted about a month and a half after the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1920* opened at the New Amsterdam theater in New York (“Ziegfeld Follies of 1920”). Ziegfeld was fresh off the success of what was thought to be the best of his Follies one year prior which had begun another run in Boston in May of 1920 (“Ziegfeld Follies at the Colonial”). The variety of acts and grand scale of production on *Good Times* dispels any doubts that it is just another *Follies* clone. While the *Follies* focus primarily on comedic musical numbers, *Good Times* takes on the review with a broader lens, leaning closer to its vaudevillian roots by incorporating stunts, animal performances, and large ensemble scenes that were meant to wow the audience (Corbin 18).

Nine shows debuted the week after *Good Times* including the new Oscar Hammerstein II show: *Tickle Me* (“News and Gossip of the Street Called Broadway”). The amount of plays that premiered in August likely diluted the box office earnings for *Good Times*, but since it premiered one week before the rest, the show likely received more focused critical attention.

During its original run, *Good Times* was reviewed by columnists from the *New York Times*, the *New York Clipper*, and the *New-York Tribune*. The *New York Clipper* was the first entertainment focused newspaper, and it later merged with *Variety* in 1924. The *New-York Tribune* was a Republican newspaper that was the largest daily newspaper in New York during the mid-19th century. The Tribune later merged with The *New York Herald* in 1924 and finally stopped printing in 1966. All three were prominent newspapers of the time, and thus the attention given to *Good Times* reflects the popularity and high standard for the rest of the shows staged at the Hippodrome.

In the *New York Times*, the review for *Good Times* was written by an anonymous critic. The show is hailed as one of the best to be staged in the Hippodrome with the attention to detail in costume choice and grandiose scale of and ostentatiousness of the production, “At the Hippodrome a song is never merely sung –it is illustrated profusely. Girls spring from spots where no one expected them [...] and choruses pour forth from 176 throats.” Specifically, the performances of a Hippodrome newcomer from England, clown Ferry Corwey, and the diving girls –one of whom (it is unspecified whether it was Dorothy Gates or Anna Mack) leapt from

the roof of the theater to the tank below. The musical numbers “Just Like a Rose” and “Hello, Imagination” from the second part are hailed as the best of the show. Despite the praise, this critic noted a few bits that fell flat during the show: Marceline’s lackluster appearance with the elephants, Bob Pender’s meaningless stilt act, and a bad ten minutes from foreign entertainers – Kara and Sek. Overall, the response was overwhelmingly positive (“‘Good Times’ Reveals Hippodrome at Best”).

Heywood Broun, the future founder of The Newspaper Guild penned his *Good Times* review for the *New-York Tribune*. Broun recounts the night that him and his wife took their child to go see the show and the review was positive, but it reveals the perception of work from the Hippodrome at the time as less complex than other forms of entertainment of the time. Because Broun brought his child to a performance of the show, he inadvertently created the assumption that *Good Times* was a family show. Broun’s review also highlights the ways in which productions at the Hippodrome reuse a lot of themes, acts, and sets in their productions. The toyland scene, the elephant acts, and the two hundred chorus girls assembling the American flag has all been done before according to Braun. Despite his derisiveness, Braun enjoyed Corwey’s unusual musical acts such as: the use of a gun barrel to play a piccolo solo and playing ragtime on a garden fence. He was also mystified by the disappearing diving girls and lamented trying to explain the trick to his son. The only explicitly negative comment given in the review was for Marceline’s performance stating that he “does not do a great deal, and his little is not particularly effective” (Broun 6).

The most overwhelmingly positive review came from an anonymous critic at the *New York Clipper*. The show is described as “positively the greatest and most worth-while (sic) one of its kind this country has ever seen.” The sheer volume of acts within the show is so large, that the critic can hardly remember them all, but that is hardly a negative in his eyes. The music of *Good Times* receives considerably more attention than other reviewers have awarded it, supported by the lofty claim that “there are several tunes which appear to be destined for wide popularity.” Specifically praised numbers include: “Just Like a Rose”, “Sunbeam”, “This Land I Love”, “You Can’t Beat the Luck of the Irish”, and “Hello, Imagination.” According to the critic, although there were few weak moments of the production, the strongest acts were Poodles Hanneford’s equestrian family, Joe Jackson’s bicycle routine, Ferry Corwey’s musical clown act, and Belle Story’s singing. Of course, the review could not be complete without describing the awe of watching Dorothy Gates (or Anna Mack) dive from the roof of the Hippodrome into the tank below (“Hippodrome Show, ‘Good Times,’ Outdoes All Former Efforts”).

Good Times and other shows of its kind at the Hippodrome were perceived as low-brow forms of entertainment that could be enjoyed by the whole family. Overall, the critical reception of *Good Times* was overwhelmingly positive. What makes the show noteworthy is the large circus-like production typical of the Hippodrome –which was regarded highly by critics of the time (Broun 6; “‘Good Times’ Reveals Hippodrome at Best”; “Hippodrome Show, ‘Good Times,’ Outdoes All Former Efforts”)

The question remains, however, is one of legacy. If so many of the acts and sets have been restaged in numerous Hippodrome shows, then can the legacy and the success of *Good Times* be fairly attributed to Burnside? Based on the content of the reviews: the toyland set, and the scene where a group of chorus girls form the flag or spell America has been done before. The

elephant acts are also a continued Hippodrome staple (Broun 6). Even the disappearing diving girls, which was attributed to Burnside in his obituary, actually originated in the 1906 Shubert Brothers show, *Neptune's Daughter*, written by Manuel Klein with no association to Burnside (Bloom 120; "R.H. Burnside"). No one can deny that Burnside put on a great show, but the extent of his creative involvement begs further inquiry.

Works Cited

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